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ABSTRACT

This document presents a model for an elementary school guidance program, based on a program used in a rural school of approximately 500 elementary students by a part-time counselor with limited financial resources. It includes the justification for such a program, a brief history of elementary guidance, and a description of the components of a specific program serving all students as effectively as possible. Three major components of an elementary guidance program are described: group guidance and counseling, individual counseling, and adult consultation services. Group guidance and counseling is described as the most effective component, serving more students in less time than can the other components. Group guidance is defined as developmental and preventive in nature, with the primary form of group guidance being classroom guidance; while group counseling is usually remedial, personal, and oriented toward identified problems. Individual counseling, which can help the counselor reach all students, including the average, learning disabled, and gifted, is described, with problem solving being the primary strategy used in individual sessions. It is contended that by working with parents, teachers, administrators, or community resource persons in the third component, adult consultation services, the counselor can indirectly increase the number of students affected by counseling. The paper concludes that the elementary counseling program is an important and critical part of the total school program. (NB)

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Elementary Counseling: A Program Model

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Introduction: The following is a model for an elementary guidance program. Included are the justification for such a program, a brief history of elementary guidance, and a description of the components of a specific program so that all students can be served in the most effective manner possible. This model is based on a program that has been incorporated into a rural school of approximately 500 elementary students by a parttime counselor with limited financial resources. The program, proactive and developmental, has been successful because of the support of the board of education, administration, teachers, non-certified staff, parents, and students. Additional information has been included to reflect current research on elementary counseling.

Children growing up on the eve of the twenty-first century are entering a world very much different from that of their parents and grandparents. Before these children reach the age of eighteen, sixty-three percent of them will experience the break-up of their family through divorce, acquiring a step-parent or two in fifty percent of the cases and often gaining a step-brother or step-sister in the process. Ninety percent will experiment with alcohol; the lives of thirty-three percent will be directly and adversely affected because of a substance abuser. Twenty-five percent of the girls and fourteen percent of the boys will be sexually abused. Ten percent of

the girls will become pregnant. Six hundred thousand will attempt suicide every year; over five thousand will succeed. And every year approximately two million will run away from home (Steinman, 1987).

Many of these problems impact most seriously on a very select population of approximately twenty-five million children ages five to twelve (Steinman, 1987) in the United States who will reside for one-third of their lives before graduation in the elementary schools. With teachers expected to concentrate on academics -- teaching the average students and providing intervention for the mainstreamed learning disabled and the gifted -- and at the same time collect lunch money and supervise playgrounds and cafeterias, there is often little time left to help these young people with their social and emotional growth and development.

A person who can help fill part of this void is the elementary guidance counselor. Even though some administrators have not yet recognized the need for this service, feeling that "teachers are close to pupils and that children in grades kindergarten through six do not have to make educational or vocational choices" (Shertzer and Stone, 1981), most have recognized the need, and the trend toward elementary counseling has begun.

This trend has evolved slowly over the years, picking up impetus only in the last two decades. In 1968 there were fewer than 4000 elementary guidance counselors in the United States with over seventy percent of them federally funded positions. Ten years later that number had increased to a little over 10,000 (Shertzer and Stone, 1981). And today approximately 20,000 counselors serve America's

elementary school children, most locally funded and growing at a rate of about a thousand per year, spurred on perhaps by the Elementary School Guidance and Counseling Act of 1979 (Holly, 1988) and an obvious need. With more and more schools across the nation adding elementary guidance services or increasing the responsibilities and time given to the current counselors, the hope is that students can "develop themselves to the fullest, exhibit effective interpersonal skills, and take responsibility for giving direction to their lives" (Dinkmeyer and Dinkmeyer, 1984). With problems solved or lessened early in elementary children's school careers, they can hopefully concentrate on the business of getting an education.

There are three major components of an elementary guidance program: group guidance and counseling, individual counseling, and adult consultation services. The most effective of these components is the group component, probably because more students can be served in a shorter period of time using this strategy. As few as two students and as many as the entire student body can be served using the group guidance and counseling component.

Group guidance and counseling are separate parts of the group component. Group guidance, designed to be developmental and preventive in nature, "utilizes information-giving, communication, and group process skills to assist students with common needs that can be discussed openly" (Steinman, 1987). The primary form of group guidance is classroom guidance. In this component of the elementary program, the counselor becomes a teacher, seeing all the children in their respective classrooms, or in a special room set aside just for

guidance activities, sixteen to twenty times during the school year (more frequently, if resources permit) for thirty to forty-five minutes each time, depending on the student-counselor ratio. Ideally, that should be one counselor for every two hundred fifty to three hundred students (Shertzer and Stone, 1981). These classroom guidance sessions provide an opportunity for the counselor to learn the students' names, build a rapport with them, and teach specific affective skills and attitudes.

Once the classes begin, some classroom teachers may wish to remain in the room to observe, to participate actively, or to sit at their desks and work on their own projects. Others may leave the room to catch up on grading or make lesson plans. Whether the regular classroom teacher remains in the room or leaves should be discussed at the beginning of the year to avoid any possible conflicts.

All classes should follow a specific guidance curriculum which blends both the cognitive and the affective domains, a curriculum that, like its content area counterparts, includes goals, objectives, a scope and sequence, activities, lesson plans, and even a class discipline plan. The counselor may use prepared kits and materials, such as DUSO and TAD from the American Guidance Service, or prepare his or her own lessons from films, filmstrips, or other media aids. The major topics of such a program include not just activities on self-esteem but also ones on self-awareness, decision-making, study skills, coping with stress, substance abuse, career education and/or other topics as needed. Obviously, no single activity or topic, already prepared or developed by the counselor, will work every year

with all students. Evaluation of the programs and revisions must be an on-going process.

Through organized classroom guidance lessons, it is possible to reach all students on a periodic and systematic basis and to teach them at an early age the "skills to distinguish healthy and unhealthy life patterns. It is also possible to provide [them] with an armament of healthy living skills that will help [them] lead more productive and satisfying [lives]" (Dinkmeyer and Dinkmeyer, 1984).

Group counseling, on the other hand, is "a dynamic, interpersonal process in which the counselor facilitates interaction among students who are coping with normal developmental problems. [It differs] from group guidance in that it is usually personal, remedial, and oriented toward identified problems" (Steinman, 1987).

Few counseling specialists utilize group intervention to help students. "Reasons may include time constraints, lack of training or experience, and administrative disapproval" (Bretzing and Caterino, 1984). However, group intervention strategies can be useful in discussing topics such as grief/death, divorce, substance abuse, relations with other students, problems with adults, or blended families.

Typical group size could be four to six students preferably of the same sex. Students may become part of a group because of classroom behavior problems, poor peer relations, limited self-concept, negative attitude toward school, and/or a tendancy to be withdrawn. Groups can be formed based on referral lists acquired from a variety of sources. Written permission is received from parents,

individual meetings are held with each child beforehand, and group rules are explained. The groups usually meet for thirty to forty-five minutes each week over a specific period of time, such as a nine weeks or a semester. Activities in group counseling could include an introductory session to help members get acquainted, role-playing, sharing personal experiences, relaxation techniques, and cooperative activities where students perhaps build things together (Bretzing and Caterino, 1984).

The counselor has specific goals in group counseling. Here the counselor "strives to create an atmosphere conducive to the realization of the goals which assist with the identity-seeking process; to develop increased self-acceptance and feeling of personal worth; to develop social skills and interpersonal abilities; to develop increased self-direction, problem-solving abilities, and decision-making skills; to develop sensitivity to the needs of others; and to help each member formulate specific individual goals (Steinman, 1987).

The second component in the total guidance program is individual counseling. In this component, students meet individually with the counselor to discuss alternatives to problems which do not require therapy. The primary purpose of this is to provide children with a process that gives them the power to solve problems on their own. The counselor should have both the skills and the sensitivity to work not only with the average students but also the learning disabled and the gifted.

The individual counseling sessions themselves originate with

either parent, teacher, or administrator referrals, or with student self-referrals. The rules of the sessions should be made clear to all students at the beginning. Information from the sessions will be confidential and shared only on a need-to-know basis with the building principal and/or the child's teacher. No specific reference to the child by name will be made to any other person. The only exception to this confidentiality rule is if the child during the session threatens bodily harm to himself or others.

Problem-solving is the primary strategy in the individual counseling sessions. The sessions usually begin with a rapport-building period followed by a discussion of the student-client's problem, his or her feelings about it, and possible alternatives. Then the client selects an alternative and a time to implement it. The client and the counselor then conclude by summarizing the session. Such a procedure works well for verbal students of average or above average intelligence who have "normal" problems. Obviously, students who have poor communication skills, below average intelligence, and/or serious problems would require a more directive approach or a referral to a therapist.

Individual counseling sessions should be documented in as concise and objective manner as possible; all counseling documents can be subpoenaed into court. Again, because these sessions are confidential, the documented information from them may be shared only with those persons who have an interest in the matters discussed. Great care should be taken not to discuss individual student's situations in public and to stress to teachers and others involved the

importance of not talking about situations around other educators or lay people (Holly, 1988).

As a result of these individual sessions, the counselor will be able to help student-clients solve some problems, lessen the effects of others, and unfortunately have no effect on others. This is the reality of individual counseling; no counselor has a magic wand to wave to solve all problems. While the counselor must be aware of the realities of the process, so, too, must the client and those who did the original referral.

There are sometimes reasons that the individual sessions lack efficacy. Some clients may choose to keep the problem rather than endure the stress or risks of trying to solve it. And the parents, teachers, and administrators must also realize that while many students will be able to solve their problems, others may never solve their problems or may take quite a long time and require many sessions to reach a solution. And while the counselor may put forth his or her best efforts to help the client, sometimes the passage of time and the maturation process alone allow the success. All concerned -- parents, teachers, administrators, as well as counselors -- need to know the strengths and weaknesses of this counseling process and work together to help students.

Individual counseling sessions will also provide the settings for working with special groups of young people, including the learning disabled and the gifted. The learning disabled children, a group of anywhere from three to twenty-eight percent of a school population (Fahey, 1984), are often characterized as "inattentive, overactive,

unmotivated, and impulsive" (Omizo and Omizo, 1987). They "are seen as less popular than their normal peers, are more likely to be ignored by teachers and peers when they initiate an interaction, are less empathetic than non-learning disabled children . . . and are more likely to be the recipients of rejection from others" (Fahey, 1984).

While some problems of the learning disabled students, including lack of improvement and negative self-concept, are brought on by academic deficiencies, often these problems are exacerbated by a "belief that suggests an external focus of control perception" (Fahey, 1984). These young people feel that they are unable to control what happens to them, "that the consequences of their lives are controlled by outside forces such as luck, fate or others in their environment" (Omizo and Omizo, 1987).

The job of the counselor then becomes one of how to change this attitude of "learned helplessness" to a more positive attitude in order to "foster the client's development of more adaptive attributions in relation to school work. Encouraging the learning disabled individuals to understand that through perseverance, they could overcome academic failure would be an important counselor attitude" (Fahey, 1984). Strategies of Adlerian pyschology, Rational Emotive Therapy, and/or the Behavioral approach can be used as weapons to help the learning disabled both psychologically and behaviorally.

Counselors will also have the opportunity to work with gifted students, a smaller group of about one to five percent of the school population (Holly, 1988). Where learning disabled children experience an external locus of control perception and often get poor grades and

have low self-esteem, logic might suggest that an internal locus of control perception with its inherent academic achievement, greater motivation, faster learning, better social adjustment, and high self-esteem (Omizo and Omizo, 1987) might go with gifted children. However, such is often not the case. Many gifted children are at risk. "Over half of the population of gifted students do not match their test ability with comparable achievement in school" (National Commission, 1983). And while gifted children do not achieve academic excellence without help, neither do they achieve emotional development alone (Blackburn and Erickson, 1986).

Counselors need to anticipate some of the predictable developmental crises that will affect the academic and occupational success of gifted children. There are five major crises that befall gifted children; two directly affect elementary children. For these elementary children there is often a developmental lag for primary age boys that keeps them from succeeding in traditional school settings, and fourth and fifth graders tend to underachieve because of inadequate curriculum and emphasis on conformity. Later on, adolescent girls often regress because of cultural stereotypes and social pressures, late adolescents are overwhelmed by career opportunities, and finally some gifted have difficulty experiencing crisis or failure after many years of easy successes (Blackburn and Erickson, 1986). Counselors must be aware of these problems that can affect gifted children.

A developmental approach to providing guidance is essential to meet the additional social and emotional needs of gifted and talented

students. The counselor must help gifted and talented students develop "healthy, realistic self-esteem based on a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses; a healthy sense of responsibility for development not contingent on fate or actions of others; internal motivation and evaluation through deemphasis on competition with others and encouragement of personal goal setting and self-evaluation; concept of self as a continual process rather than a finished product; understanding of the needs and motivations of themselves as well as others and use of empathy and identification skills to develop cooperative rather than competitive spirit" (Blackburn and Erickson, 1986).

The counselor must also help gifted and talented student-clients to develop a "sense of acceptance of mistakes, resulting in pride in learning from errors and reduction in fear of failure; brainstorming and problem-solving skills to enhance naturally divergent creative thinking; assertive behaviors in communicating with others about differences and concerns without being aggressive and obnoxious; methods of using frustrations and stress in creative ways to avoid burnout; ability to accept help as well as give it to learn something from all persons, regardless of their level of intelligence, talent, or skill; and a sense of humor about themselves and the events outside their control, allowing them not to take everything so seriously as to be debilitating and self-defeating" (Blackburn and Erickson, 1986).

Obviously, it is very important for the counselor to implement the individual counseling component of the elementary guidance program. With this component present and responsive, the counselor can hopefully meet the needs of the entire population in the elementary school, including the average, the learning disabled, and the gifted.

The third component of the elementary counseling program is adult consultation services. By working with groups of adults -- parents, teachers, administrators, and/or community resource persons -- the counselor can indirectly increase the number of students he or she can affect (Shaw and Goodyear, 1984).

Counselors can work with parents through family counseling projects and parenting in-service activities. The goals of family counseling are to "involve families in the shared responsibility of helping their children, to provide short-term counseling to those families not considered to be more chronic and dysfunctional and thus in need of services best provide by the local mental health system, to follow a problem-solving method of family treatment using systemic assessment procedures so as to determine how the problem was generated or maintained by the family, to reduce or eliminate the presenting problem and to subsequently improve the overall quality of family life by restructuring family patterns of interaction, [and/or] to coordinate treatment efforts by consultation with classroom teachers and principals" (Goodman and Kjonaas, 1984).

Parenting in-service activities can be set up just like teacher in-service conferences. A needs assessment survey can be sent to parents, several topics can be identified from surveys returned, programs and speakers can be selected with the site of the conference being the school or a local hotel with meeting rooms, the conference can be held, and an evaluation can be made. Funding for such activities can be provided by the the local school, by sponsoring businesses, by charging participants, or by applying for a grant from

a foundation.

All three components of the elementary guidance program require some administrative and clerical responsibilities. The counselor will need to write correspondence and newsletters, chart test data, document counseling sessions, prepare reports for the administrators, and create in a formal way new programs. All the duties where the counselor is not working directly with the students in guidance or counseling or related activities should be minimized. This means unless there is an emergency, counselors should not be used as lunch or playground supervisors or as substitute teachers.

The elementary counseling program is an important and critical part of the total school program. With the three components in place and a competent counselor to implement them, elementary students will grow up with the necessary skills and attitudes to solve the problems that they will face as citizens of the twenty-first century.

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